

## Conference Seeks Answers To Drugs

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October 15 2005

First as a surgeon, now as a Hartford city councilman, Robert L. Painter has seen up close the effects of the city's and region's drug trade.

And from both professional perches, he's concluded the same thing: the war on drugs, as it is currently being waged, is not going well.

"There are no signs of diminishment," Painter said. "We still have crime. We still have shooting galleries. We still have people coming in from the suburbs to buy drugs. We still have people getting killed arguing over turf."

So Painter has organized an open-tent conference on illicit drugs - a come-one-come-all community discussion with the goal of exploring all solutions, proposals and suggestions.

The conference, scheduled for Oct. 21 and 22 at Trinity College, will include state and local law enforcement officials, former drug addicts and a leading champion of marijuana legalization from California.

The lineup also includes a member of the Washington State Bar Association who has proposed that state's officials get in the business of dispensing illegal drugs to the addicted, thereby taking the job away from violent street gangs.

From this entire stew of opinions and experiences, Painter is hoping to find some common ground - and an alternative solution that people of all backgrounds could get behind.

"We want people to put aside their prejudices and their dogmas," Painter said.

"Are we going to legalize marijuana? Treat it like alcohol? Tax it?" Painter said.

"Everything will be up for grabs at this conference. At the end of the conference I'm hoping there will be enough people who want to get together to change something."

Though many of the sessions focus on illicit drug use and enforcement in Hartford, others look at issues of prevention, treatment and relapse.

Some sessions are designed to help frame the drug issue, not just as a criminal matter, but as a matter of public health, which Painter believes it is.

"I'm a doctor," he said. "My exposure to the drug situation was as a surgeon when

someone would come in all shot up and I had to decide what drugs were they on, what kind?"

"I was never happy with the treatment they got when they got back home. I would read about someone I'd sewn up get arrested and go to jail for the same offense. They were going back to the streets. I knew that. Everybody knew that."

Painter will be tape recording the sessions and discussions and plans to distill the salient points into a working paper.

The conference begins Friday at 8 a.m.. Additional information and registration information is available at <http://www.hartford.gov/drugconference>.

Scholarships to attend are available.

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